

Christian Fundamentalism - 1

by Anton Bosch

Anton Bosch explores the principles and characteristics of Christian Fundamentalism, emphasizing the importance of Scriptural authority and literal interpretation.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 5:32, Isaiah 66:2, Mark 7:13, John 8:31, 1 Corinthians 2:13-14, 2 Timothy 3:15, 2 Peter 1:19, Revelation 3:8, Revelation 22:18

Topics: "Biblical Authority", "Theological Conservatism"

Description

Anton Bosch discusses the varying definitions of Christian labels and emphasizes the importance of understanding Christian Fundamentalism according to Professor Malan's comprehensive definition. Christian Fundamentalists strongly adhere to basic Scriptural principles and values, recognizing the authority of the Bible as the literal and inerrant Word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit. They interpret Scripture literally, reject spiritualization, acknowledge spiritual realities, and maintain theological conservatism by interpreting the Bible in its plain meaning without altering its fundamental truths.

Transcript

Christian labels keep changing and mean different things to different people. What is a "fundamentalist" and what are the hallmarks of a Christian Fundamentalist? Professor Malan from South Africa has done an excellent job of defining what we believe Christian Fundamentalism is. I know others have other definitions but I fully support Professor Malan's version and feel that his paper is so important that I have suspended my normal articles to publish this series. - Anton Bosch.

There are so many variations of Christianity with regard to its practices and creeds that the question is often asked: which is the correct one? Christians who strongly adhere to basic Scriptural pronouncements, principles and values are referred to as fundamental, conservative or evangelical believers. The characteristics of this disposition will be reviewed in terms of its relevancy to a sound faith.

Christian fundamentalism is associated with the following 32 basic principles:

Recognition of Scriptural authority. The Bible is recognized, in its original languages, as the literal and inerrant Word of God which was inspired by the Holy Spirit. It contains true knowledge on our salvation in Jesus Christ, and also offers a sure foundation to our Christian life in every domain: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim.

3:15-17; cf. 2 Pet. 1:19-21). God is the supreme authority in the universe and His pre-eminence renders all pronouncements in His Word authoritative. If we fear God we should recognise the authority of His Word and diligently walk in its light. Divine blessings are promised to us if we do not deviate from the Word (Deut. 5:32; Isa. 66:2; Rev. 3:8). On the other hand, the judgements of God rest upon all people who turn their backs on Him, reject His authority and despise His Word.

A literal interpretation of Scripture. The literal, grammatical-historical interpretation of Scripture is foundational to evangelical Christianity. The Lord meant what He said to particular people during a particular time. Figurative language and symbolism should be confined to passages which the Bible itself indicates to be understood in that way. The rule is: When the plain sense of the Word makes common sense, then seek no other sense. Even where symbols are used, they mostly have literal antitypes and should therefore not be interpreted allegorically. The beast with the seven heads, for instance, is not an abstract concept which should be interpreted allegorically but a symbolic description of a person, the Antichrist. Descriptive names are often used in the Bible to emphasise certain moral or spiritual characteristics of a person. In this way, Christ is depicted as the light of the world, the water and bread of life, the Lamb of God, etc. When people deviate from the literal interpretation of Scripture, e.g. by alleging that Israel is the church or that Jesus only metaphorically rose from the dead, they proclaim their own, subjective rendering of the Word, thereby completely changing its basic meaning.

The rejection of spiritualisation. The apostles and the early church fathers observed the principle of *sensus plenior* (Eng. plain meaning) when interpreting Scripture. They accepted that Scriptures only have one, basic meaning. During later centuries, this approach was increasingly rejected. Origen (b. 185 AD) is the father of allegorical interpretation and has written several books on this subject. He was strongly influenced by the Greek philosophy of Plato and tried to synthesise philosophy and Christian dogma. He regarded the Bible as a book full of symbols and allegorical constructions, and therefore did not interpret it literally. To him, the true meaning of the Bible was to be found in the philosophical-spiritual *gnosis* (knowledge of spiritual mysteries) to which each believer should advance. To him, there was no possibility of a literal kingdom of Christ on earth, neither of a personal Antichrist who will rule the world for seven years prior to the coming of Christ. The allegorical interpretation of Scripture has a very dubious origin as the Bible is not interpreted by itself but viewed in terms of a philosophical approach as an abstract book with a hidden, esoteric meaning. This approach is still perpetuated in reformed theology, since the reformers as well as their successors preferred to reject the rule of *sensus plenior* in order to, among others, avoid the idea of the literal restoration of Israel. Cell groups and care groups in churches are often encouraged to explore the multiple meanings that may be derived from Scriptures by spiritualising them. To each person, a verse may mean something quite different. In this way they rarely consider the basic, root meaning of a verse. Fundamentalists cannot accept this approach to the Bible. Different applications of the same truth are in order, but not completely different renderings of the same Scriptural pronouncements.

The recognition of spiritual realities. A literal form of interpretation also fully provides for the recognition of spiritual statements in the Bible. There is no truth in the claim by spiritualising theologians that only they understand the Bible spiritually while fundamentalists understand it literally, thereby denying its spiritual truths. This argument suggests that only they are spiritual and we are not. The fact is that we accept the root meaning of every verse. If the basic meaning of a particular verse is spiritual, we accept it on face value as a spiritual statement. We do not try to change Scriptures that have an obvious spiritual meaning. According to our understanding, it is not exegetical sound practice to spiritualise virtually the entire Bible,

thereby robbing it of its basic meaning and thus undermining the authority of Scripture. There is no sound basis for true spirituality if you do not have an authoritative Bible.

Theological conservatism. A fundamental Christian is conservative since he is committed to interpreting and applying the message of the Bible in terms of its plain meaning. People who take the liberty of changing the basic meaning of a Scripture by way of spiritualising or allegorising it, are acting in a liberal and wilful way. They do not respect the root meaning of God's Word and decide for themselves which other meaning(s) to attach to it. There are no limits to the self-willed exegesis of liberal theologians. Many of them take literal concepts such as heaven, hell, the devil, the Antichrist, Israel and the millennial reign of Christ, and then offer explanations which differ radically from those which the Bible give. They even go as far as denying the reality of some of these concepts. As justification for their liberal presumptuousness they allege that the Bible was written in terms of an ancient worldview, when people still believed in dragons, the devil and hell. The modernist says that God's revelations in the Bible were phrased in terms of primitive superstitions and uses this argument to actually rewrite the entire Bible. God will severely punish them, as stated in the last chapter of the Bible (Rev. 22:18-19). (To be continued).

Prof. Johan Malan, Middelburg, South Africa (February 2008)

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